

Session Seven
**Emotional “Short Circuits” and
“Brain Shutdown”**

7

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and “Brain Shutdown”**

The NDEP strongly encourages inviting a medical person (health care provider or certified diabetes educator) to participate in any sessions that you conduct to provide support for the discussion and to answer any specific medical questions that may arise.

Background

Strong emotions can set off the “fight or flight” response of the nervous system. This response, which relies on animal instinct instead of thought-out decisions, is helpful in a sudden emergency when a person needs to react quickly by running away or fighting back. But when these strong emotions remain with people all the time because they are upset about something (such as having a chronic medical condition like diabetes) and have trouble dealing with it, the feelings can be destructive. Hiding these emotions doesn’t help. Finding a way to bring them out and face them often does help.

Objectives

1. To discuss ways that the people in film *The Debilitator* deal with their emotions.
2. To describe what is happening when a person can’t think clearly because of strong emotions.
3. To discuss effective and ineffective ways of dealing with strong emotions.



Time needed for discussion: 45 to 60 minutes.

Materials

- DVD of the film *The Debilitator*.

For instructions on borrowing *The Debilitator* film, see page 4 of this guide.

- DVD player/TV monitor.
- Small memo pads (3 x 5 inch)—one for each participant—and pens or pencils.
- Optional: Flipchart or blackboard for writing down key words from discussion.

Method

- Conduct a facilitated discussion (group discussion with a leader asking stimulation questions).
- Play the film, or select scenes from the film as needed.

Begin the session by discussing how the characters in the film *The Debilitator* deal with their emotions around living with diabetes.



1. **Tell the group:** Think about the last scene of the film, which shows people interacting in the diabetes support group. *[You may choose to replay the scene to refresh participants' memories.]*
2. **Ask:** Which characters are experiencing strong emotions, and how are they dealing with them?

Examples might include:

- The African American teenage boy who says, "I honestly wish that I was normal like all my other friends." This boy seems stunned and depressed about his diabetes. His quiet statement about just wanting to be normal is disturbing and makes us wonder how much emotion he is holding in.
Ask: How can holding in these emotions work against him?
- The Latina who says, "The blood vessels in my eyes are not getting enough oxygen.... I don't want to go blind." She seems fearful of her future. Fear can paralyze people or spur them to action.
Ask: How is she is dealing with her fear of blindness?

- The white man who says, “I’ve had diabetes for about 3 years.... About 6 months ago I had to have my foot amputated.”

Ask: What is going on with his emotions? How could they be working against him?

Possible responses:

- Maybe he had diabetes for a long time but couldn’t face thinking about it or didn’t take it seriously until he had a serious complication (the nerve or blood vessel damage that led to the amputation).
- Maybe he was afraid to go to the doctor so his diabetes went untreated for years.

3. **Ask the group:** Where do the people in the support group in this film get their strength? Can you recall positive attitudes about living with diabetes that the other people in the support group shared?

Examples might include:

- The older African American woman who says, “I’ve had diabetes for 10 years, but I don’t claim it. It’s my faith that keeps me physically, emotionally, and spiritually strong.”
- The white woman with type 1 diabetes who says, “Diabetes does not need to be a debilitator.” Her attitude is a “take charge” one: take control of your diabetes so that it does not control you.
- Calvin says, “I’m going to beat the odds.” He has been told about all of the possible serious complications of diabetes, but he also knows that the statistics do not mean that he will inevitably have complications or die from diabetes.

4. **Ask the group:** Which one of these characters do you relate to the most and why?

Continue the session by discussing how emotions can “short-circuit” the brain and cause “brain shutdown.”

5. **Tell the group:** Think back to your childhood. Were you ever suddenly called on in class to answer a question or do a math problem, and your mind went blank? What is going on in a situation like that? Your brain, in a sense, short-circuits when you are experiencing powerful emotions. It's hard to think clearly, to make decisions, and to deal with things that you could normally handle when your brain short-circuits and shuts down. You have to let the emotions out and work through them to get your brain back on track.
6. **Ask the group:** Have you ever had the feeling of a lump in your throat, a feeling of tightness as if you were closed in, or a feeling that you couldn't think straight because you were upset and were holding in your emotions? What did you do that helped?

Answers might include:

- Yelling.
 - Having a good cry.
 - Talking to someone.
 - Praying.
7. **Ask:** What are some other things that a person can do to deal with these strong emotions that can short-circuit the brain and hinder a person's ability to make good decisions?



Make sure that the discussion brings out positive actions that people can take to calm their emotions and to increase their decision-making ability.

Examples might include:

- Exercising. Exercise has a calming effect that helps you think clearly.
- Writing in a diary or journal, or writing a letter to yourself.
- Talking with others in a support group.
- Giving yourself permission to cry. You may feel much better after you let those tears flow, and you

may then be able to do what you need to do to help safeguard your health.

- Sharing your emotions with your family. Your family members are the most important people in your life, so don't shut them out!

8. **Ask:** What are some negative things people do to try to get rid of the panicky feeling that comes from strong emotions and that works against them?



Make sure that the discussion brings out the following points:

- Overeating or bingeing, especially on junk food. Many people do feel calmer when they stuff themselves with food, but what they're experiencing is a vicious cycle.
- Drinking alcohol.
- Yelling at your children, your spouse, or your friends.
- Hitting someone or something.
- Staring at the television.

Classroom Exercise



1. Hand out 3 x 5 inch memo pads (one for each participant) and pens or pencils.
2. Ask participants to write their names on their pads. Emphasize that this book now belongs to them, and that it is small enough to keep with them all the time in a purse, or in the pocket of a shirt or jacket.
3. Spend 10 minutes now in a quiet thinking exercise. Ask all participants to write down a brief description of at least one time when they experienced the brain shutdown caused by strong emotions. Then have them write down one positive action that they think they could take if this situation were to arise again.

4. After 10 minutes has passed, ask if anyone needs more time. If yes, give 5 minutes more, and then call the group back together.
5. **Ask:** Is anyone willing to share a story about when you experienced “brain shutdown” and what you did?

If no one responds, you may share a story of your own, you can point out what Calvin did, or you can do both. Calvin could have just allowed his dream to play over and over in his head without doing anything except worrying about his diabetes. Instead, he talked to his family, and he told his story at a support group. He voiced his fears.



Homework Exercise

Remind participants to keep their memo pads with them and to write down the following:

- Any situations in which they experienced brain shutdown and couldn't make a decision because they were upset.
- What they did (or were tempted to do) in that situation, such as yelling, overeating, or hiding from others.
- What they plan to do to deal more positively with strong emotions in the future.

Tell participants that they may also use the memo pad as a personal journal or diary, or to write a letter to themselves.

If the group meets again, consider asking the participants at future sessions to share how they have been using their memo pads and what changes this writing exercise has brought them.